

# [People's Padre: An Autobiography \(1954\), by Emmett McLoughlin](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

By: Nunez-Eddy, Claudia Keywords: [Reproductive Health Arizona](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

Emmett McLoughlin wrote *People's Padre: An Autobiography*, based on his experiences as a Roman Catholic priest advocating for the health of people in Arizona. The Beacon Press in Boston, Massachusetts, published the autobiography in 1954. McLoughlin was a Franciscan Order Roman Catholic priest who advocated for public housing and healthcare for the poor and for minority groups in Phoenix, Arizona, during the mid twentieth century. The autobiography recounts McLoughlin's efforts in founding several community initiatives throughout Phoenix, including the St. Monica's Community Center, later renamed St. Pius X Catholic Church, the Phoenix housing projects, and St. Monica's Hospital, later renamed Phoenix Memorial Hospital. McLoughlin's autobiography discusses his advocacy for people to have greater access to maternity and prenatal healthcare, to testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, and to [birth control](#) <sup>[3]</sup> in the Phoenix area.

The *People's Padre* is an autobiographical account of McLoughlin's life up until the 1950s. The book has eight chapters following the chronology of his life: "A Priest Forever," "Unto the Least of These," "A Corrupt Tree," "The Hall of Judgement," "Founded Upon a Rock," "A New Contract," "Speaking the Truth in Love," and "Upon the Altar of God."

In the first chapter titled "A Priest Forever," McLoughlin recounts his family background, childhood, and initiation into the Catholic priesthood. McLoughlin was born on 3 February 1907, in Sacramento, California, as John Patrick McLoughlin. The eldest of four, McLoughlin was born to immigrant parents who came to the US from Ireland during the Irish potato famine of 1846. The family lived in Sacramento, California, where there was a prominent Irish Catholic community.

McLoughlin was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and attended St. Francis Elementary School, a parochial school in Sacramento, California. There, he attended daily mass, religious classes, and maintained constant contact with the priests and nuns of the Church. In 1922, McLoughlin attended St. Anthony's Seminary at the Order of Santa Barbara in Santa Barbara, California, a twelve-year training program for priesthood in the [Roman Catholic Church](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. He spent the first six years in junior seminary, where he completed four years of high school work and two years of college work. Starting in 1928, he spent six years in the senior seminary at the Santa Barbara Mission in Santa Barbara, undergoing an indoctrination process. McLoughlin studied Catholic philosophy and theology, and he accepted the doctrines of the church.

The Franciscan Order of the [Roman Catholic Church](#) <sup>[4]</sup> ordained McLoughlin to the priesthood in June of 1933. McLoughlin took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. McLoughlin says that the vow of obedience would become the most important to the Church and his most difficult to uphold. During indoctrination into the Franciscan Order, member names are changed to symbolize the start of a new spiritual life. As part of his indoctrination, McLoughlin changed his name from John Patrick to Emmett, in memory of an Irish saint.

In the second chapter of McLoughlin's autobiography, "Unto the Least of These," McLoughlin describes his placement in Arizona and his involvement in establishing clinics for venereal infections treatment and prenatal care. In June of 1934, a provincial council of the Franciscan Order that operated in California, Arizona, Utah, Oregon, and Washington, sent McLoughlin to St. Mary's Church in Phoenix, Arizona. McLoughlin describes being shocked at the decision. He had seldom heard of Arizona and questioned if people lived there. The council told him that they assigned him there as punishment for his stubbornness. The council hoped the heat and hard work required in Arizona would change McLoughlin's personality.

McLoughlin arrived at St. Mary's Church in Phoenix on 30 June 1934. The Franciscan Order of the [Roman Catholic Church](#) <sup>[4]</sup> staffed St. Mary's Church, and primarily served South Phoenix, where African American and Mexican migrants lived along with poor whites. McLoughlin recounts seeing Phoenix as a wonderful place to be a new priest, describing it as rampant with sin, corruption, and souls needing salvation. McLoughlin reports that he saw his assignment as both an opportunity and a challenge.

As a new priest, and the youngest at St. Mary's Church parish, McLoughlin was assigned the tasks that the older priests did not want. He became the chaplain of St. Joseph's Hospital, later renamed Dignity Health St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center, of the Arizona State Hospital for the Insane, of the county poor farm, and of all the nursing homes in Phoenix. His duties as chaplain were to give the dying their last rites, which were prayers meant to prepare the souls of the dying for death. According to McLoughlin, acting as chaplain spurred his interest in the health of Phoenix citizens.

McLoughlin continues the second chapter by describing the city of Phoenix and the health issues that its residents faced. McLoughlin describes Phoenix in the 1930s as a sprawling, densely populated town that relied on cattle and cotton for its economy. However, in the southwest region of Phoenix, which was near the city dump, dwellings were mostly shacks without electricity or plumbing. Residents often built their dwellings with collected tin cans, cardboard boxes, and wooden crates. According to McLoughlin, that area of Phoenix was one of the reasons Arizona had the highest infant and maternal mortality rate in the nation. McLoughlin remembers himself as eager to work in the area, describing what he calls as a rampant cesspool of poverty, disease, and venereal disease as an opportunity.

To help the southwest Phoenix slum community, McLoughlin writes that he entered a subscription contest for a local Catholic magazine and won a 600 dollar prize. With the prize money, McLoughlin purchased an old grocery store, which he renovated into a church and social hall for African Americans who were not allowed to enter other Catholic churches. He named the facility St. Monica's Community Center. McLoughlin says that the social hall reduced juvenile delinquency by providing youth with alternative safe activities, such as dancing. McLoughlin acknowledges that the center did not address the many women and children in the community that had severe health problems resulting from lack of maternity care.

McLoughlin explains that during the 1930s, the state of Arizona had no prenatal clinic. McLoughlin sought to create a clinic to provide healthcare for pregnant women. The owner of a building adjoining the St. Monica's Community Center was a Roman Catholic who had recently lost his young daughter. After hearing McLoughlin's plan to open a maternity clinic, the owner gave McLoughlin the property. The building was then remodeled into what McLoughlin describes as the first maternity clinic in Arizona. Staffed by registered nurses and licensed doctors, the clinic offered free home deliveries to all women in the neighborhood. Doctors delivered infants in shacks, tents, under bridges, and often worked without running water, electricity, or sterile equipment.

Despite the clinic's efforts to assist women with labor and delivery, McLoughlin claims that venereal diseases, or sexually transmitted infections, affected many in the community. Pregnant women passed sexually transmitted diseases to their infants during [pregnancy](#)<sup>[5]</sup> and delivery, which often resulted in [birth defects](#)<sup>[6]</sup> and health issues in those infants. To help treat and prevent sexually transmitted infections, McLoughlin recruited the help of two local physicians: Leo Tuveson and Sebastian Caniglia. The physicians offered their services to the southwest Phoenix neighborhood. Additionally, the Arizona State Health Department, headquartered in Phoenix, offered to run the necessary laboratory tests and provide treatments to Phoenix patients testing positive for a sexually transmitted infections. With the assistance of physicians and the Arizona Health Department, the clinic tested for and treated sexually transmitted infections in the southwest Phoenix community.

In Chapter two, McLoughlin recounts that the Catholic Church responded negatively to the new clinic offering venereal disease testing and treatment. According to McLoughlin, his fellow priests were angry, believing that venereal infections were God's punishment for sexual promiscuity. McLoughlin notes that the Catholic Church said that providing a cure for venereal infections interfered with God's will. McLoughlin ignored the protests of the Church and continued providing care for the community.

McLoughlin says that as he became better known in the community, he began receiving property bequests in wills. With new property, he established a playground with floodlights, the only one that existed in the area. At the playground, community members organized intramural softball teams, for which all players were African Americans. During a time of severe racial segregation, McLoughlin championed all races. By the late 1930s, the St. Monica's Community Center was referred to by locals as the Father McLoughlin Mission.

Though McLoughlin provided some healthcare and community services to those in southwest Phoenix, the community lacked discounted government funded apartments for poor low-income families. In 1937, US Congress in Washington, D.C., passed the US Housing Act, which provided federal funds for the eradication of slums. Two years later, McLoughlin was appointed as the Chaplain of the Arizona House of Representatives in Phoenix and lobbied for a bill to use those federal funds for a Phoenix City housing project. After the bill passed, the Phoenix City Council appointed McLoughlin as the chairman of the housing projects.

In the third chapter, "A Corrupt Tree," McLoughlin describes his increasing problems with the Catholic Church over its positions, including its support for racial segregation. McLoughlin details how his involvement in the Phoenix housing projects angered the Roman Catholic clergy. According to McLoughlin, the Catholic Church believed that poverty and deprivation instilled self-sacrifice and holiness in those affected by it. Therefore, providing the poor with new houses would give them luxury that would lead to sin. However, McLoughlin disregarded the his Catholic Church superiors and continued the housing project. The 2 million dollar project developed three housing sites to house over six hundred families in Phoenix. The projects opened in the mid 1940s, as the US entered World War II.

McLoughlin describes that by the 1940s, he was unhappy in the priesthood. During childhood, McLoughlin was taught that non-Catholics were to be tolerated but not trusted. He reports that he became increasingly frustrated with the Catholic Church's inconsistency and believed the Church was failing to practice its own ideals. Additionally, the Church continued to support racial

segregation. When St. Joseph's Hospital refused to admit an African American nursing student, McLoughlin swore he would build his own hospital and nursing school where all races would be accepted.

In chapter four, "The Hall of Judgement," McLoughlin recounts his work establishing St. Monica's Hospital in Phoenix, and his decision to leave the Catholic Church priesthood. By the 1940s, Arizona had become a military hub. The US Air Force had bases in Phoenix due to the warm, dry climate and cloudless sky with good visibility. Military personnel along with engineers, contractors, and their families moved into the city, overwhelming community facilities and hospitals. The hospitals in the Phoenix area were often full, frequently turning away minority groups including African Americans, Mexicans, and poor whites.

In 1940, US Congress passed a bill that provided states with federal funding to help communities adjust to wartime populations. The Federal Works Agency, headquartered in Washington, D.C., provided funds to build facilities including hospitals. McLoughlin campaigned to receive those funds to open an interracial hospital and nursing school in Phoenix. The federal government accepted the proposition and appropriated money for the construction of the hospital and school.

On 14 February 1944, St. Monica's Hospital opened and on 1 October, the nursing school opened in the hospital. The St. Monica's nursing school became the first interracial nursing school in the Western US. Physicians were required to treat all patients prior to asking for financial information. McLoughlin was the superintendent of the hospital.

McLoughlin continues by describing the importance of [birth control](#)<sup>[3]</sup> in the organizations he helped lead. McLoughlin states that he believed in the necessity of [birth control](#)<sup>[3]</sup> and instructed all the medical staff to give women information on [contraception](#)<sup>[7]</sup>. However, McLoughlin's beliefs about birth control opposed those of the Catholic Church. McLoughlin says that the Catholic prohibition of [birth control](#)<sup>[3]</sup> ultimately exploited women. According to McLoughlin, the lack of [birth control](#)<sup>[3]</sup> financially and emotionally disrupted families with the births of unwanted and uncared for children.

McLoughlin continues the fourth chapter recounting how he left the Catholic Church. In 1947, the Provincial Council of the Roman Catholic Church, headquartered in Santa Monica, California, required McLoughlin to appear before it. McLoughlin met with the Council in Santa Monica, where it said he was failing in his spiritual life. The council claimed McLoughlin had become a worldly priest and was neglecting his spiritual duties to his parishioners. The Council claimed his hospital duties were responsible for that neglect and required McLoughlin to relinquish his unspiritual work. McLoughlin told the Council that he would leave the post when the hospital's finances improved and it could hire a paid staff member for the position. However, McLoughlin remained as superintendent of St. Monica's Hospital against the orders of his superiors in the Catholic Church.

The fourth chapter of McLoughlin's autobiography concludes with letters sent between McLoughlin and the Provincial Council. On 18 September 1948, McLoughlin received a letter from the Provincial Council stating that he must sever all connections with St. Monica's Hospital and be reassigned from Phoenix. McLoughlin did not sever his connections and expected to be excommunicated from the Church. However, according to McLoughlin, two doctors at the hospital persuaded him to take other actions. The doctors argued that McLoughlin had to retain the respect of the public to maintain the hospital and that respect would be better gained through purposely defying the Church, rather than letting the Church cast him out as though he were disobedient. On 1 December 1948, McLoughlin sent a letter to the Provincial Council officially resigning from the Franciscan Order and the priesthood of the [Roman Catholic Church](#)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Chapter five begins with several letters sent to McLoughlin, some in support of his decision to leave the Church, and some in disappointment and anger. Along with the letters, McLoughlin discusses his conflicting views on the Catholic Church and his struggles to find his faith. The chapter ends with the certificate of appreciation McLoughlin received in 1952 from the City of Phoenix for his work in the housing projects.

Throughout chapter six, "A New Contract," McLoughlin describes his life after the priesthood, specifically his budding relationship with hospital worker Mary Davis. After his resignation from the priesthood, McLoughlin began attending the hospital's social events. According to McLoughlin, at a picnic in South Mountain Park in Phoenix, he realized he was attracted to Davis, a two-time Episcopalian divorcee. Davis worked at the hospital as a registered medical record librarian, transcribing dictation from the physicians. McLoughlin and Davis married on 13 August 1949. Included in chapter six are more letters of correspondence from Catholics across the country aghast at McLoughlin's marriage. The Church and his family condemned McLoughlin.

In chapter seven, McLoughlin describes the Church's attempts to dishonor him and force him from Phoenix. However, McLoughlin remained in Phoenix and continued working at St. Monica's Hospital. In 1951, the hospital name was changed to Memorial Hospital. McLoughlin describes how the majority of hospitals across the US followed the Roman Catholic code of hospital ethics, which regulated the ethics of hospitals based on Catholic religious teachings. Additionally, McLoughlin recounts how in 772 hospitals, the doctrine of the [Roman Catholic Church](#)<sup>[4]</sup> trumped the laws of the states. In those hospitals, it was forbidden to discuss [contraception](#)<sup>[7]</sup> or to provide therapeutic abortions, even in cases for which pregnant women's lives were endangered. McLoughlin expresses his disagreement with the Catholic code of hospital ethics and the authority it has over many

hospitals.

McLoughlin concludes his autobiography with chapter eight, "Upon the Altar of God," in which he describes his culminating feelings about religion. He states that while he rejected the Catholic Church, he thought that there was some good within the Church and its religion. However, McLoughlin relates that his experiences in the priesthood were not unique. McLoughlin claims that many priests would follow his lead and leave the priesthood. Finally, McLoughlin concludes that though he rejected the [Roman Catholic Church](#)<sup>[4]</sup>, he did not reject God or religion in general.

After publication of his autobiography, McLoughlin received both positive and negative feedback due to the longstanding controversy between the [Roman Catholic Church](#)<sup>[4]</sup> and those who supported [reproductive rights](#)<sup>[8]</sup>. The institutions McLoughlin founded, including the Phoenix Memorial Hospital, the Phoenix housing projects, and the St. Monica's Community Center, all persisted into the twenty-first century.

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## Subject

[Birth control clinics](#)<sup>[13]</sup> [Abortion](#)<sup>[14]</sup> [Phoenix, Arizona](#)<sup>[15]</sup> [McLoughlin, Emmett, 1907-](#)<sup>[16]</sup> [Catholic Church](#)<sup>[17]</sup> [Roman Catholic Church](#)<sup>[18]</sup> [Franciscans](#)<sup>[19]</sup> [Reproductive rights](#)<sup>[20]</sup> [Sexually transmitted infections](#)<sup>[21]</sup> [VD \(Disease\)](#)<sup>[22]</sup> [Contraception](#)<sup>[23]</sup> [Arizona-History](#)<sup>[24]</sup> [Obstetrics](#)<sup>[25]</sup> [Hospitals](#)<sup>[26]</sup> [Catholicism](#)<sup>[27]</sup> [Priests](#)<sup>[28]</sup> [Family Planning Services](#)<sup>[29]</sup>

## Topic

[Outreach](#)<sup>[30]</sup> [People](#)<sup>[31]</sup> [Publications](#)<sup>[32]</sup> [Religion](#)<sup>[33]</sup>

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[Articles](#)<sup>[34]</sup>

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## Links

- [1] <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/peoples-padre-autobiography-1954-emmett-mcloughlin>
- [2] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/reproductive-health-arizona>
- [3] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=birth%20control>
- [4] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=Roman%20Catholic%20Church>
- [5] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=pregnancy>
- [6] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=birth%20defects>
- [7] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=contraception>
- [8] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=reproductive%20rights>
- [9] <http://www.legisworks.org/congress/75/publaw-412.pdf>
- [10] <https://archive.org/details/peoplespadreanau008612mbp>
- [11] <http://uscode.house.gov/statviewer.htm?volume=54^page=1126#>
- [12] <http://www.phoenixmag.com/History/health-before-habit.html>
- [13] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/birth-control-clinics>
- [14] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/abortion>
- [15] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/phoenix-arizona>
- [16] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/mcloughlin-emmett-1907>
- [17] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/catholic-church>
- [18] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/roman-catholic-church>
- [19] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/franciscans>
- [20] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/reproductive-rights>
- [21] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/sexually-transmitted-infections>
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- [30] <https://embryo.asu.edu/topics/outreach>
- [31] <https://embryo.asu.edu/topics/people>
- [32] <https://embryo.asu.edu/topics/publications>
- [33] <https://embryo.asu.edu/topics/religion>
- [34] <https://embryo.asu.edu/formats/articles>